



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Urban transformations in the River Plate Estuary: Modernism and Challenges of Globalisation

Citation for published version:

Garcia Ferrari, M 2009, Urban transformations in the River Plate Estuary: Modernism and Challenges of Globalisation. in *Docomomo Symposium 'South City'*. University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Docomomo Symposium 'South City'

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Garcia Ferrari, M. (2009). Urban transformations in the River Plate Estuary: Modernism and Challenges of Globalisation. In *Docomomo Symposium 'South City'*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



'Urban Transformations in the River Plate Estuary: Modernism and Challenges of Globalisation'

Dr Soledad Garcia Ferrari

Extended Abstract

Theoretical framework

The study is structured around a theoretical framework, which is grounded on the understanding that urban development is a socio-spatial process. The changes generated by globalisation in the past thirty years have influenced the emergence of social, political and economic processes, which have affected all aspects of urban life. However changes differ in each region. Whereas global forces have an effect on urban transformations across the globe, these forces are mediated by local political, geographical, social and organisational histories.

The approach is therefore institutionalist and based on a dual interpretation of institutions as both 'organizations' and 'mental models' (Jenkins & Smith, 2001). This leads to the study of different types of relation between 'structures' and 'actions' such as, for the allocation of resources, the constitution of norms and policies and the definition of ideological frameworks.

Giddens's theory of structuration (1984) identifies three types of relation through which specific actions are shaped by structuring forces and through which structuring forces are themselves produced (Healey, 2007:21). These are: **allocative structures** (the way in which material resources are allocated); **authoritative structures** (the constitution of norms, values and regulatory procedures) and **systems of meaning** (frames of reference, ideologies, rationalities, discourses). A similar classification is made by Madanipour (1996) using simpler language: resources, rules and ideas.

To the institutional approach this framework adds a new political economy perspective, looking not only at how politics and economics influence each other, but also at how these are mediated by social (and cultural) institutions, and how the relations between all three of these structures evolve historically (Smith & Garcia Ferrari, 2010 forthcoming). The objective is to identify how the characteristics of institutions and their relations in given societies generate the concept of 'institutional thickness' (Amin & Thrift, 1995), which includes relational stability and an 'archive of commonly held knowledge', which affect and drive change.

This study focuses on recent changes in the River Plate region influenced by globalisation and reflects on political and economic changes during the 20th century as modernist ideas shaped urban development in the region.

River Plate region - history

Latin America has developed since colonisation around port cities. The role of each centre expressed the political and geographical possibilities of each location in the area of conquest, generating administrative, religious, commercial or military centres. The

River Plate region had potential for control over the southern navigation of the Spanish empire and for the development of fertile natural prairies.

In the River Plate region The City of the Santísima Trinidad and Puerto del Buen Aire was founded in 1580 and the City of San Felipe y Santiago de Montevideo was founded as a military fortification in 1724 by the Spanish governor of Buenos Aires. In early 19th century independence was promulgated in both countries and Buenos Aires and Montevideo cities began to expand. In both countries' development, the role of the state was very significant: it founded new cities, defended the territory, provided land, legitimised commercial activities and established the first educational centres. On the contrary, in the British colonies of North America these actions were the product of private and communitarian initiatives (Caetano & Rila, 2002).

The turn of the century shows the opportunity for economic growth with the opening of European market after the First World War due to the need for food combined with the development of the meat refrigerating industry. In this context both states saw opportunity for the implementation of new political and social ideas and the emerging liberal state aimed to affirm private property, stimulate industrial development and urban concentration and to consolidate the role of the region in a worldwide context (Barran & Nahum, 1967).

In this cultural context Le Corbusier's visit to the River Plate in 1929 generated applause and enthusiastic adhesions among teachers, students and young practitioners in architecture. Whereas in Paris as well, as in many other European cities, modern architecture tended to be an idea linked to utopias, in Montevideo, modern architecture initiated significant transformations to the most characteristic areas of the city (Arana & Garabelli, 1991).

Between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s the Uruguayan economy went to decline. The impossibility of generating a self-sufficient economic policy together with the marked technological gap with the developed world originated a long period of crisis. Growing external debt soon contributed to economic stagnation and increased social discontent. Following a series of states of emergencies declared by the president, and associated revolts in 1972 Congress declared a state of internal war and suspended constitutional guarantees. In 1973 military leaders with the support of America decided they had to take control of the country's political affairs and demanded the creation of a 'national security council' to oversee the administration (Caetano & Rila, 2002). The military government maintained intense political repression until 1984, when after the collapse of the military rule in Argentina, the armed forces agreed to hold elections and restore civilian government.

Globalisation in the past thirty years: trends and challenges

Castells's concept 'space of flows' and 'space of places' entails the understanding that urban structures are the result of a dialectical tension between locally oriented organisations interacting with global mobility of goods, people and information (Castells, 1996).

Among the consequences of the emerging deregulation policies is the reduction of government expenditure on public and social welfare, which contributed to the creation

of gentrified neighbourhoods and polarised areas (Garcia Ferrari, 2006). Deregulation and growing participation of external market forces in the creation of urban areas has influenced the emergence of places that might have few linkages with national economies and local traditions

Place competition is also a significant characteristic of recent global dynamics with the need for redefining city-images and regeneration of former spaces for production to 'emblematic' landscapes for consumption (Barke & Harrop, 1994).

In the River Plate region democracy was restored in the early 1980s and the need for implementing regulatory and structural changes to respond to economic trends at the global scale and facilitating foreign investment and financial transactions. In the 1990s market forces were leading urban politics and development, which began to respond to the requirements of capital flow, generating the emergence of new areas of 'centrality' linked to transport networks (Muxi, 2004). The regeneration of urban areas repeating models of implementation in the North characterised this period. However the tendency has been of ignoring local characteristics and needs as well as the absence of local mechanisms and processes for implementation. As a result further segregation and social inequalities can be observed. Since the end of the 1980s the urban and architectural practices implemented in the River Plate area had different degrees of success. Some have remained as unfinished attempts in the urban fabric of the 'american laboratory' (Fernandez, 1998).

Among the most significant trends affecting urban development in the area vary from theoretical and utopian proposal to concrete regeneration projects. The exploration of the concept of metropolis and multi-city linking both sides of the River Plate was part of the debate at the end of the 1980s. In this context large-scale infrastructure projects were proposed. Whereas this idea was supported by academic leaders and some local politicians, the proposal of a transnational fixed link was not approved by the Argentinean government (Garcia Ferrari, 2006).

One of the changes in the urban fabric in the past thirty years has been the emergence of 'new centrality patterns'. The traditional city centre, location of most commercial and financial activities has experienced what could be identified as a 'new peripheral condition' with increasing commercial and financial activities in former residential areas. In this context the regeneration of large-scale buildings unused has taken place (Sprechmann & Capandeguy, 1997). Occasionally creating 'cathedrals for consumption' dissociated from the immediate urban context (Muxi, 2004).

Another example of regeneration strategies is the restructuring of large portions of urban landscape for new uses. Areas formerly linked to port activities have been the objective for regeneration plans on both sides of the River Plate. Whereas Puerto Madero area can be seen as a successful experience in economic terms, a similar project, Plan Fenix in Montevideo failed. Both projects show the need for establishing complex interactions among organizations and people, however the design of platforms for these interactions is not always found. The national government remains as a key actor in development processes in the area (Garcia Ferrari, 2006).

Preliminary conclusions

The study shows that in both cities socio-spatial segregation can be identified. There tends to be a lack of control of private investment in development on both sides of the River Plate, resulting on an unequal urban growth with increased levels of social polarisation and discrimination. Particular spatial division is observed between coastal and central areas. This social heterogeneity resulted in different forms of land use, settlement patterns and cultural values. Spontaneous forms of land occupation can be identified, contributing to the consolidation of these areas and to the generation of infrastructure, health and educational demands.

The absence of consistency on urban approaches is also affecting this area on a regional and even transnational level, with no clear interest for a regional approach to urban development.

References

Amin, A & Thrift, N (1995) 'Globalisation, Institutional Thickness and the Local Economy' in Healey, P, Cameron, S, Davoudi, S, Graham, S & Madanipour, A (eds) *Managing Cities in the New Urban Context*, John Wiley, Chichester

Arana, M & Garabelli, L (1991) *Arquitectura Renovadora en Montevideo 1915-1940* Fundacion de Cultura Universitaria, Montevideo

Barke, M. & Harrop, K (1994) 'Selling the industrial town: identity, image and illusion' in Gold, JR & Ward, S (eds) *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions*, John Wiley, Chichester

Barran, JP & Nahum, B (1967) *Historia del Uruguay Moderno (1851-1855)* vol. 1, EBO Montevideo

Caetano, G. & Rila, J (2002) *Historia Contemporanea del Uruguay*, Coleccion Claeh Editorial Fin de Siglo, Montevideo

Fernandez, R (1998) *El laboratorio Americano. Arquitectura, geocultura y regionalismo*, Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid

Garcia Ferrari, MS (2006) *What mediates the impacts of globalization on urban form and physical infrastructure in specific contexts? Case studies of the River Plate and Oresund*, PhD thesis published in May 2006, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

Giddens, A (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Polity, Cambridge

Healey, P (2007) *Urban Complexity and Spatial Strategies: Towards a relational planning of our times*, Rutledge, Abignon & New York

Jenkins, P & Smith, H (2001) 'The State, the Market and Community: An Analytical

© Garcia Ferrari, M. (2009). Urban transformations in the River Plate Estuary: Modernism and Challenges of Globalisation. In *Docomomo Symposium 'South City'*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh.

Framework for Community Self-Development' in Carley, M, Jenkins, P & Smith, H (eds) *Urban Development and Civil Society: the Role of Communities in Sustainable Cities*, Earthscan, London & Sterling, VA

Madanipour, A (1996) *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into a Socio-Spatial Process*, Wiley, Chichester

Muxi, Z (2004) *La Arquitectura de la Ciudad Global*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona

Smith, H & Garcia Ferrari, MS eds (2010 forthcoming) *Waterfront Regeneration: Experiences in City Building*, London Earthscan

Sprechmann, T & Capandeguy, D (1997) 'Montevideo: entre el cambio competitivo y el posicionamiento marginal'. Revista Domino, Editorial Dos Puntos, Montevideo